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# The Golden Legend and Chaucer's Physician's Tale and Second Nun's Tale

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The Golden Legend and Chaucer's  
Physician's Tale and Second Nun's Tale

by

Mary Ann Ponder

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

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Approved:

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa

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## INTRODUCTION

A survey of Chaucer scholarship in the past fifty years reveals an unwarranted lack of attention to those of the Canterbury Tales commonly known as the "religious tales." Once labeled thus, these tales do not often elicit further critical analysis by scholars. A pattern of neglect seems to be reinforced by the example of Nevill Coghill, who groups the tales told by the Man of Law, the Prioress, and the Second Nun as stories written for the edification of Christians, and then dismisses them as unnoteworthy by saying, "It is not often that they have any beauty other than moral beauties of fortitude, chastity, devotion, and the like, for these do not necessarily beget literary beauties."<sup>1</sup>

The religious tales have the added misfortune of being labeled as products of Chaucer's early period. This places them in a category with those works which are assumed by some to be hampered by foreign influences and medieval writing conventions. In other words, one is led to believe that the religious tales are lacking in the qualities of originality and literary grace that characterize Chaucer's artistry. What the modern reader may not realize is that the very conventions that are labeled as unappealing in the religious tales are the same qualities that made such tales popular for the medieval audience.<sup>2</sup> If the problem for the modern reader in dealing with Chaucer's religious tales is one of perceiving

the tales in their proper dimension, then a closer look at the form and content of these tales should give the reader a better idea of the ideals exemplified, of the literary conventions observed, and, perhaps, an appreciation of Chaucer's religious tales that, too often, is not experienced by Chaucer's twentieth century audience.

A study of the general scholarly position regarding the religious tales is not of much value in seeking a better understanding of this medieval type of literature. A typical critical response to medieval religious tales, in a text which summarizes the form and content of literature of the Middle Ages, is the following statement by W. T. Jackson. He says, "No apology is needed for the omission of works whose connection with true literature is remote--didactic material such as the collections of exempla and books on manners and conduct; religious material, such as the lives of saints, sermons, and mystical writings. All of them provided material for literature, but that is the extent of their importance."<sup>3</sup> There are other studies which give the religious tales a more sympathetic treatment; however, they seldom deal specifically with the saints' legend genre, of which these tales are a part, in a manner that assists the modern reader to comprehend the spirit in which the tales were written to be read.

In the attempt to investigate the literary conventions of Chaucer's time, one finds few studies which deal directly

with the parallels between the form of Chaucer's tales and that of the saints' legend genre. Much current commentary tends to emphasize the irony and realism of Chaucer's work, which is the very antithesis of the holy intent and conventionalized form of the saints' legend. D. S. Brewer notes, in an essay about literary trends, a shift in criticism to a more sympathetic treatment of the fabliaux, and a renewed interest in romance and courtly love.<sup>4</sup> Much attention by modern critics centers on the topics of love, allegory, and rhetoric, but most studies related specifically to the religious tales tend to dwell on the sources and analogues to the tales.<sup>5</sup> It is possible to read detailed, complex descriptions of the textual transmission of the tales,<sup>6</sup> or of the intricacies of Chaucer's rhetoric and syntax,<sup>7</sup> but the modern reader must search extensively to find basic commentaries on Chaucer's use of the saints' legend genre.

There are some notable exceptions to this neglect in Chaucerian scholarship concerning the saints' lives tradition. Claude Jones outlines the form and content of the Second Nun's Tale in a very brief definition,<sup>8</sup> but most such work does not focus on Chaucer's tales. Sister Mary Raynelda Makarewicz attempts to capture the spirit of Chaucer's time in describing the patristic tradition in medieval literature.<sup>9</sup> In a historical context, Helen C. White describes the development of the saints and martyrs literary genre, with particular attention

to the Legenda Aurea.<sup>10</sup> Hippolyte Delehaye, a Bollandist, gives a sympathetic and definitive treatment of hagiographical works of the Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> Gordon Hall Gerould defines the saints' legends as a literary genre, traces their development, and notes their influence in medieval literature. As a working definition of the saints' legend genre as a literary type, Gerould proposes that "The saints' legend is a biographical narrative, of whatever origin circumstances may dictate, written in whatever medium may be convenient, concerned as to substance with the life, death, and miracles of some person accounted worthy to be considered a leader in the cause of righteousness; and, whether fictitious or historically true, calculated to glorify the memory of its subject."<sup>12</sup> Charles Jones defines the hagiographical conventions of early England, and traces the development of historical martyrology to a literary form of saints' life.<sup>13</sup> Dealing specifically with the pulpit tradition in medieval England, G. R. Owst examines the importance of sermon hagiography upon the general development of literature.<sup>14</sup> Finally, but not of the least importance, is a current investigation by Michael R. Paull which makes a direct comparison of the saints' legend genre with Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale.<sup>15</sup> Paull's critical analysis attempts to fill the void in Chaucerian scholarship dealing with the problems of characterization, structure, and style of this tale for a better understanding of the tale and the

form to which it belongs. Rather than emphasizing how Chaucer deviates from the saints' legend conventions, Paull demonstrates how Chaucer used the form to heighten the effect and artistry of his tales.

In view of the lack of previous scholarship regarding Chaucer's use of the saints' legend genre, and my own belief that this form deserves more attention because of the presence of a literary grace, in this thesis I will discuss some of the medieval conventions of the saints' lives tradition for the consideration of modern readers of Chaucer's works. In the second chapter I will deal directly with one of Chaucer's actual sources of saints' lives material, the Legenda Aurea by Jacobus de Voragine.<sup>16</sup> I will define the form of the saints' legend genre as a literary type, and I will describe some of the legends, particularly those of female saints and martyrs, to demonstrate what these tales are really like. In the third chapter I will deal specifically with the characteristics of the saints' legend genre in Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale and the Physician's Tale.<sup>17</sup> Special emphasis of this commentary will be given to the medieval conventional attributes of a virgin martyr as embodied in the figures of St. Cecilia and Virginia.

Unlike the legend of the Christian martyr Cecilia, the story of Virginia is not usually classified solely as a part of the saints' legend genre. However, I wish to consider



these tales together because of the obvious thematic parallels of the virgin martyrs and because of Chaucer's less obvious use of the saints' legend conventions in character, plot, and style to be found in the Physician's Tale.

### THE GOLDEN LEGEND

For a better understanding by modern readers of the literary type used by Chaucer in the religious tales I will turn to The Golden Legend, or Legenda Aurea, by Jacobus de Voragine as a guide for the interpretation of the saints' legend genre of the Middle Ages. It seems very likely that Chaucer was familiar with the saints' lives as told in The Golden Legend because during the Middle Ages it was second only to the Bible as a source of religious inspiration. In the fifteenth century the Legends led even the Bible in sales.<sup>18</sup> The popularity of The Golden Legend and its influence as a source of moral sustenance to the people of the Middle Ages cannot be overestimated. The Golden Legend provided knowledge for the scholar and a model for the peasant by which to pattern his life. In The Golden Legend people found a picture of human life, a summary of the world's history, strange adventures, and wonderful miracles. The stories are a combination of historical fact and popular idealization. For those who seek for the spirit of the age to which The Golden Legend belonged, Voragine's fidelity in reproducing earlier stories makes his work invaluable reading.<sup>19</sup>

The Legenda Aurea was written in Latin between 1250 and 1280 by Jacobus de Voragine, a Dominican, for the purpose of religious instruction.<sup>20</sup> At that time, the common man was illiterate and the universal language of the educated man was

Latin. The recording of the saints' stories was intended for the clergy to transmit orally to their congregation as a systematic celebration of the ecclesiastical year.<sup>21</sup> The Christian martyrs in the legends were used as heroic examples for both warning and inspiration in medieval religious teachings. Of the pulpit tradition, G. R. Owst says, "Stories of saints and devils, likely episodes of Scripture and an apocryphal heaven and hell told in the vernacular, these then constitute as we shall see a typical contribution of English medieval preaching to popular thought, full of the elemental passions and instincts of a thinly disguised folklore."<sup>22</sup> With the spread of literacy in the late Middle Ages and with the coming of the printing press, there was a demand for the saints' lives written in the vernacular. After Chaucer's time, The Golden Legend was translated and adapted from the Latin stories of the saints' lives by William Caxton in 1483 and was widely copied and circulated. "The legends thus permeated the religious, social, and political fabric of the Middle Ages. Whatever its absolute worth, it was for many centuries one of the most influential branches of literature."<sup>23</sup>

For a more detailed discussion of the characteristics of the saints and of the tales in The Golden Legend, let us consider some representative examples of the legends of the female saints and martyrs. A closer look at these tales will

demonstrate how the saints came to be understood in Chaucer's time, and how the church defined the requirements necessary to achieve the title of saint. In answer to the question "What is a saint?" Jacques Douillet lists some of the attributes generally ascribed to all saints. In brief, Douillet states that the title of saint is reserved "to those who march in front and give example to Christian people; to those whose lives give proof of unquestionable holiness, of whom the church is ready to declare that they have attained Paradise and are now living in everlasting blessedness with Christ."<sup>24</sup> These characteristics appear to the fullest extent in the legends of Saint Justina, Saint Euphemia, and Saint Catherine.<sup>25</sup>

Most of the legends begin with the etymology of the saint's name. For example, "Justina comes from justitia, which means justice, because by justice she gave to each his due."<sup>26</sup> Names are treated symbolically in the calendar of saints to illustrate the virtues characteristic of the saints. Some of the descriptions are lengthy and repetitious, and in the case of more than one interpretation of the name, both are given. "Euphemia comes from eu, good, and femina, woman, and means a woman who is helpful and upright and gives joy... or Euphemia is the same as euphonia, which means a sweet sound."<sup>27</sup> Sometimes a complete synopsis of the saint's life is worked into the etymology of the name alone, as in the

story of Saint Catherine.<sup>28</sup> The interpretation of names is intended to provide a model of those natural attributes which precede the gift of grace, that are seen as creative, moving forces directed toward God and the call to holiness.

The body of the story begins with a short explanation of the saint's childhood years and coming of age in the Christian sense. Frequently, the female saints are of noble birth and Christian upbringing. Saint Euphemia was the daughter of a senator and a self-acclaimed Christian. Saint Justina was the daughter of a pagan priest. She was converted at an early age and was baptized with her parents following a dream in which Christ and his angels appeared to them. Saint Catherine was the daughter of King Costus and instructed in all the liberal arts. Even at a young age, the maidens reflect the holy qualities of the spirit and soul of the saints. They have faith in God, and their whole existence is given up to that certainty. They demonstrate great courage in the total commitment of their choice in Christ, for to choose is to sacrifice, to give up a worldly life for one given altogether to God. In the case of the martyrs the choice to accept Christ was by way of death.<sup>29</sup> "Conversion does not happen once for all. Every day the choice has to be confirmed, the sacrifice renewed. After their conversion saints persevere and they go forward in holiness."<sup>30</sup>

Early in the narrative the saintly heroine is juxtaposed to a wicked antagonist. The characters, types representing good or evil, lack the individuality or psychological qualities of rounded characters. This contrast of extreme character types is necessary to emphasize the allegorical nature of the legend and to render emphatically the opposite motivating forces which operate within the tale. Thus, the saint is idealized as the epitome of beauty and goodness, whereas, her antagonist is thoroughly evil and void of redeeming qualities. The conflict between good and evil is used to illustrate, typologically, a God-ordered, Christian universe where those on the side of the Lord always triumph. It is in this manner that the saints' lives are the concrete realization of the spirit of the Gospel. Just as the church requires proof that a person was virtuous to a heroic degree to be admitted to the calendar of the saints, so the structure of the legend is designed to illuminate the characteristics of the martyr heroically. It is love and determination to be faithful that enable the saints to confront torment and death so boldly. The conventions of the saints' legend are all directed to the purpose of revealing that nobility of soul, selflessness, and courage to face suffering and death for the love of God that are typical of all saints, thereby giving encouragement to others to model their lives according to these holy examples.<sup>31</sup>

In the story of Saint Catherine, the religious ideals that she represents are established in the etymology of her name. Besides having these saintly characteristics, Catherine is beautiful and intelligent. A contrast of good versus evil is created by the confrontation between Catherine and the Caesar, who is characterized as a pagan and a lecher. Catherine is presented as a superhuman example of virtue and wisdom, whose strength to speak and act is founded in the power of God. The Caesar is dumbfounded by her eloquence and ability to argue "according to the divers modes of the syllogisms, by allegory and metaphor, by logic and mystic."<sup>32</sup> Rather than the physical tortures which are common plight of the Christian martyrs, Catherine is subject to a contest of wits against all the most learned men of the time. Addressing the men, Caesar says, "I could have forced her to offer sacrifice, or destroyed her with tortures, but I judged it better that she should be completely refuted by your arguments."<sup>33</sup> Commending herself to God, Catherine receives the holy power to subdue her opponents by the logic of her arguments, to convert them to Christianity, and to lead them on to the "palm of martyrdom." Tests of increasing difficulty are used to demonstrate Catherine's faith and courage to a heroic degree. Enraged by his losses, the tyrant subjects Catherine to prison and bizarre forms of torture. Catherine remains undaunted, and by divine intervention she converts

the queen and the soldiers, thus frustrating the attempts of the king to eradicate Christianity. The story reaches its climax when Catherine is martyred by being beheaded. Catherine's faith thus becomes a basis for conversion of others and a holy example of the ideals of Christianity.

The plot of the saint's legend is usually developed by a series of situations that follow a pattern of the heroine being commanded to offer sacrifice to the idols, followed by argument, refusal, and grotesque punishment. She usually receives superhuman protection from God to endure torture and receives Holy Communion before her ultimate death and martyrdom. To emphasize the allegorical nature of the narrative, the legend is deliberately structured in a number of short dramatic scenes in a repeated pattern of confrontation-passion-triumph. This episodic series of events is used to heighten the situation and convey the impression of a protagonist's struggles being of a heroic degree. Jacques Douillet explains the religious significance of the development of the saint's moral life to the level of heroism as follows: "Constant living in God's presence works by making like: the soul follows the pattern of its divine environment. It is instructive to notice that the further a saint advances in heroic sanctity, the more dazzling and difficult his achievements, the more he insists that he counts for nothing and that it is God in him who is doing it all."<sup>34</sup>



The legend of Saint Justina follows the order of presentation and the pattern of repetition and intensification just described. Cyprian, the magician, attempts to seduce Justina by sending a demon in his behalf. The first demon fails in his mission when confronted by the Holy Cross, so Cyprian sends a second demon. When the second demon fails, Cyprian invokes the Devil himself to do his bidding. Tests of increasing difficulty and superhuman feats do not overcome Justina, and the protagonist assumes heroic proportions when she ends the seven-year plague with her prayers. Overwhelmed by the strength of the cross, Cyprian renounces the Devil and receives Christian baptism. The faith of both Justina and Cyprian is tested to the ultimate when they refuse to offer sacrifice to pagan gods; the ruler subjects them to grotesque punishment which they endure with heavenly assistance. Finally, they are beheaded and win the crown of martyrdom. Throughout the series of events leading to Justina's death, the plot operates on the principle that the increase of torments means a corresponding increase of glory in the sight of the Lord.

Following the inevitable martyrdom of the protagonist, the legend usually provides a statement telling the fate of the persecutors, the whereabouts of the saint's remains, and the occurrence of miracles in the saint's name. This convention of the saint's legend is designed to illustrate the

saint's continuing ability to perform wonders with the power of God. The story of Saint Euphemia ends with her martyred by a sword wound in the side, her executioner devoured by a lion, and the judge gnawed to death by himself. Her burial place is stated, as are the year of her death and the information that her great faith still inspires others to convert to Christianity. A final commendation in her honor is quoted from Saint Ambrose with a request that Saint Euphemia intercede for us sinners. The marvelous happenings after the saint's death are a sort of supernatural materialization of spiritual value and significance. Thus, we are witness to the church's teaching on the communion of the saints as a living reality.

The saints, as illustrated in The Golden Legend, have been classified by Helen White according to basic patterns of sanctity as the apostles, the martyrs, the confessors, and the virgins who are "the spouses of the eternal king."<sup>35</sup> According to Jacques Douillet, the distinction between the saints and the general body of God's holy people is not a "difference in kind but only one of degree: they exemplify in fine fashion what every Christian must want if he has grasped the meaning of his Christian vocation."<sup>36</sup> The noted hagiographer, Hippolyte Delehaye, says of the spirit of The Golden Legend that "The saints show forth every virtue in superhuman fashion--gentleness, mercy, forgiveness of wrongs,

self-discipline, renunciation of one's own will; they make virtue attractive and ever invite Christians to seek it. Their life is indeed the concrete manifestation of the spirit of the Gospel; and in that it makes this sublime ideal a reality for us, legend, like all poetry, can claim a higher degree of truth than history."<sup>37</sup>

The Golden Legend was written for the edification of Christians. The commemoration of the saints was inspired by religious devotion and intended to increase that devotion, but it was not necessarily limited to historical accuracy.<sup>38</sup> Although usually adapted from an official record, the legends could take any literary form chosen to suit the popular imagination and have little resemblance to factual reality.<sup>39</sup> Because of the proportion of fictional element in the narrative, The Golden Legend has been categorized as hagiography rather than historical writing as defined by the Bollandists.<sup>40</sup> In the legends, historical persons were removed from their proper surroundings, isolated in time and space, and in a sense molded in a classic stance. The actual individual was replaced by an idealized figure that was a personification of an abstraction, and the medieval audience thus saw only a type.<sup>41</sup> This principle of duplication was clearly stated by Reginald of Canterbury when he said, "All things are common in the communion of saints."<sup>42</sup>

The use of repetition by the legend writers to make clear the literary form was not intended to deceive, even though as a result the miracles of one saint were ascribed to some other saint. The legends' most prominent points--the prologue, the transitions, the climax, the epilogue--were frequently repeated by legend compilers verbatim from predecessors' words.<sup>43</sup> The purpose of this frequent duplication was to emphasize the likenesses of the saints, their common saintliness, not their differences. The frequency with which manifestations in one saint were applied to the account of another caused Gregory of Tours to comment, "Some ask whether we should say the life of the saints or the lives of the saints."<sup>44</sup>

James W. Earl proposes that the saints' lives were often typologically structured and that they conform to a universal pattern.<sup>45</sup> In the formation of legend, "the tendency to transfer and amalgamate gave rise very early to formulae, which were used to embellish certain situations likely to arise in the lives of many saints."<sup>46</sup> Factual detail was replaced by the miraculous, the life of the saint became gradually generalized, the details forgotten or even purposefully erased. The miracles of the legends were not seen as unique events, but rather as the most conventional aspect of the saints' lives.<sup>47</sup> Writers of legend were generally excused for allowing themselves to be carried away in

recording miracles, "both because their devotion impelled them to leave out nothing that seemed to increase the glory of their heroes, and because their readers were avid for marvels and always wanted more."<sup>48</sup> Obviously, there are premises which the writers of legend and their medieval audience shared which the modern reader no longer shares.

# CHAUCER'S SECOND NUN'S TALE AND PHYSICIAN'S TALE

The influence of the saints' legend genre is readily identified in some of Chaucer's tales. The Man of Law's Tale and the Prioress's Tale approximate the saints' legend type, although the story of Constance is a romance and the tale of the "litel clergeon" an exemplum.<sup>49</sup> The Second Nun's Tale most clearly shows that Chaucer was capable of understanding the spirit in which the legends were written. Rather than changing the form or content of his source, Chaucer used the saints' legend conventions to heighten the artistry of the tale.<sup>50</sup> The Physician's Tale, a tragic story and exemplum, is primarily concerned with moral instruction, though not wholly in the religious sense. But the lives of Virginia and Cecilia, like those of the saints in the legends, represent the search not only for goodness but for truth. The Christian Cecilia and the pagan Virginia both exemplify the conventional attributes of the virgin martyrs as depicted in The Golden Legend.<sup>51</sup>

As I discuss Chaucer's use of the saints' legend conventions I will not limit my comments solely to the thematic concerns related to secular-religious ideals of the Middle Ages, although there is an obvious parallel in the stories of Cecilia and Virginia which illustrates virginity as a state of perfection.<sup>52</sup> The present thesis will deal with Chaucer's

Second Nun's Tale and Physician's Tale in terms of characterization, structure, and style as have been described in the second chapter in regard to The Golden Legend. In addition, I intend to demonstrate how Chaucer added features that are characteristically his own to the basic elements of the saints' legend type rather than subtracting from or changing the structure of his source. Clearly, it was not Chaucer's intention to claim originality for his version of the life of Saint Cecilia, but rather to give his attention to the rhyme-royal stanzas and versification.<sup>53</sup>

Chaucer begins the Second Nun's Prologue by relating her speech against the evils of Sloth and by giving the second nun's solution to avoid "ydelnesse," the translation of the story of the "mayde and martyr, Seint Cecile" from the Latin text. The Second Nun's Tale is preceded by an invocation to the Virgin Mary and an interpretation of the name of Cecilia. As in the legend, the etymology of the name is used by Chaucer to emphasize the allegorical nature of the tale.<sup>54</sup> The surface story-level of the legend is fanciful and improbable, but beneath the exultant images lie fundamental concepts of Christian belief. The life of Saint Cecilia, virgin and martyr, is used as an exemplar of the way to heaven. The story has a holy and noble purpose, which is conveyed in the language of high religion.

It is to seye in Englissh "hevenes lillie,"  
 For pure chaastnesse of virginitee;  
 Or, for she whitnesse hadde of honestee,  
 And grene of conscience, and of good fame  
 The soote savour, "lillie" was hir name.  
 (87-91)

The second nun continues to say that the name alternatively means a path for the blind or a kind of compound of "hevene" and "lia," meaning her holy contemplation and her ceaseless activity, respectively. Or, finally, the name may come from "hevene" and "leos," for Cecilia is, figuratively, a heaven to people.

Chaucer retains the episodic narrative structure of the original legend in the Second Nun's Tale. The tale begins with a brief description of Cecilia's noble Roman heritage, her early adherence to Christian precepts, and her concern with preserving her virginity. The plot is presented in a seemingly prescribed pattern giving small but significant portions of the saint's life. Cecilia's spiritual devotion is stressed by including the information that she habitually fasted every second and third day, and even on her wedding day, she wore a hair shirt under her gown of gold and gave her thoughts to God alone. Like all of the saints, Cecilia practices humility, mortification, and self-denial.

In the bridal chamber scene that follows, the action relies on dramatic dialogue between Cecilia and her husband, Valerian, which demonstrates Chaucer's use of both the



conventions of the genre and the aesthetic principles that underlie them. Typical of the series of dramatic scenes which form the plot, the bridal chamber scene relies on rhetoric rather than a description of the situation in order to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Here as in later scenes, especially of Cecilia at court, Chaucer uses Cecilia's speech to heighten the dramatic effect of his source.<sup>55</sup>

In the tale, Cecilia begins her holy mission by declaring her chastity and persuading Valerian and Tyburt to acquire her beliefs to receive the blessings of God. The use of supernatural events such as the disappearance of the old man with the book of gold letters, the angel with garlands of red and white, and Cecilia's three-day resistance to death are of little significance aside from the religious message that these events reveal.<sup>56</sup> Following the brothers' baptism by Pope Urban, the Christian precepts for life in this world are depicted by Cecilia, the teacher. The newly converted brothers are to renounce all idols, live chaste, and experience the truth and love of Christ by means of faith. This faith is tested by the persecutions inflicted by the prefect Almachius. However, the brothers hold steadfast to their faith and their martyrdom leads to the conversion of their former enemies.

Chaucer does not change the overall structure of the tale from that found in the traditional saints' legend genre. There is the usual etymology of the saint's name, the repeated pattern of confrontation-passion-triumph, and the epilogue.<sup>57</sup> As in all the saints' lives, there is a common aspiration towards an unworldly goal. Cecilia progresses through life to heaven. On the journey, she has various adventures and is beset with perils. The plot outline exists on both a surface level and an allegorical or divine level which illustrates the age-long combat with evil. The action hinges on a repeated pattern of moral confrontations which culminate in the passion and triumph--first involving Valerian and Tyburt, then Cecilia. To emphasize the allegory, the tale is deliberately structured in an episodic rather than a unified series of events.<sup>58</sup> The general effect of these dramatic scenes is somewhat related to modern notions of melodrama by the predominance of plot and physical action over characterization.<sup>59</sup> In each scene, Cecilia is portrayed as the saintly heroine who is aided by both her faith and miracles. She is thrown into allegorical conflict by means of the confrontation with Almachius who represents an opposing force or barrier to her heavenly goal. Cecilia's confrontation with Almachius illustrates the contrast of good with evil. The contrast is created by employing the structural device of juxtaposition of the saintly heroine to the wicked



"Why spekestow so proudly thanne to me?"  
 "I speke noght out stedfastly," quod she;  
 "Nat proudly, for I seye, as for my syde,  
 We haten deedly thilke vice of pryde."  
 (473-476)

The characterization of Cecilia embodies the saintly virtues of virginity, humility, steadfastness, and justice; as conversely, Almachius embodies the vices of idolatry, pride, and injustice.<sup>64</sup> This incarnation of certain vices and virtues makes both characters nearly personified abstractions and almost entirely allegorical.<sup>65</sup>

Like the other Christian martyrs in The Golden Legend, Cecilia is commanded to worship idols, refuses, and therefore is subjected to grotesque punishment.<sup>66</sup> Again, Cecilia is aided by her faith and miracles to endure the torments by the prefect's executioners, and to thwart her antagonist's attempts to eradicate Christianity. This pattern of repetition and intensification by endurance tests of increasing difficulty is a saints' legend convention used to demonstrate the protagonist's virtue to a heroic degree.<sup>67</sup> Cecilia resists death despite superhuman punishment, and, by divine intervention, she lives long enough to preach the faith to those she had converted and to establish a church, before her final martyrdom. Cecilia's ultimate death becomes a triumph of good over evil which illustrates the Christian principle that faith in God conquers all, the torments of pagans and suffering, and that faith is undeterred by earthly obstacles.

The epilogue of the Second Nun's Tale is brief, but typical of the saints' legend genre in content. It states the whereabouts of Cecilia's remains, that her tomb is venerated as a saint's, and that her house is converted to a church which is consecrated by Saint Urban.<sup>68</sup> The epilogue represents an official recognition by the Church that Cecilia was truly worthy of receiving the title of saint for her unquestionable holiness and total commitment to God as demonstrated by her heroic achievements and martyrdom.

As in the Second Nun's Tale, Chaucer's handling of character, plot, and style in the Physician's Tale appears quite simple on the surface to many modern readers of the Canterbury Tales. The basic plot of the tale seems short and uncomplicated. The knight, Virginius, has a beautiful and virtuous daughter, Virginia, formed by the vicar of God, Nature. The lecherous judge, Appius, plots to seduce Virginia for himself. Virginius kills his daughter rather than allowing her to become a victim of Appius' lust. Appius sends Virginius to prison, but townspeople realize Appius' injustice and they release Virginius, exile Appius' cohort, and hang all other conspirators. Appius is thrown into prison where he kills himself. The ultimate source of this tale is Livy's History, Book iii.<sup>69</sup>

Again, a comparison with The Golden Legend will demonstrate certain characteristics of the saints' legend genre

in Chaucer's tale of Virginia as have been identified in his life of Saint Cecilia. These features, easily recognizable to Chaucer's medieval audience, add a religious dimension to the secular philosophical basis of the source. A discussion of the saints' legend conventions in the Physician's Tale will offer the modern reader a better understanding of both the tale and of how Chaucer combined these religio-philosophical elements.<sup>70</sup>

Chaucer's contributions in the Physician's Tale have been clearly established as two long passages (lines 35-120 and 207-53) which he added to Livy's tale.<sup>71</sup> The original story begins with an introduction of the honorable Virginius and his beautiful daughter. There is a discourse by the Goddess Nature who compliments herself for the perfection of her creation, Virginia. Following the description of Virginia's natural beauty in terms of Nature's delight, Chaucer's first inserted passage begins. The narrator says:

And if that excellent was hire beautee,  
A thousand foold moore vertuous was she.  
(39-40)

Chaucer's description of Virginia's maidenly virtues is remarkably like those qualities commonly attributed to the Christian virgin martyrs. The ideals of virginity, humility, and patience are embodied in Virginia and patterned after the saints' lives tradition.<sup>72</sup> Virginia is chaste in soul and body, modest in dress and behavior, wise yet circumspect in

conversation, and "evere in bisynesse/ To dryve hire out of ydel slogardye." Virginia makes a conscious choice to live a virtuous life; she abstains from wine and avoids festivities that might be occasions for flirtations. In all ways, Virginia exemplifies those virtues and qualities possessed by the saints.

There is a digression from the main story in which the narrator addresses "ye maistresses," or women in charge of the conduct of young maidens, to set a good example as they are responsible for the moral development of the younger generation. They are never to cease instructing them in virtue, for Our Lord's sake, because:

Of alle tresons sovereyn pestilence  
Is whan a wight bitrayseth innocence.  
(91-92)

It is commonly supposed that Chaucer had the family of John of Gaunt in mind when he wrote the digression on the responsibilities of governesses and parents; however, Sister Mary Raynelda Makarewicz suggests that the passage is similar to exhortations by Saint Ambrose to those in charge of the education of the young.<sup>73</sup> The latter proposal would, I believe, more closely connect this passage with the saints' legend type.

The narrator continues the description of Virginia as the exemplary maiden of virtue who is loved by all "save Envye allone." The narrator attributes this concept of the

deep opposition between virtue and envy to Saint Augustine. Thus in the context of a pagan tale a contrast is established between virtue and vice, in the Christian sense, and the audience is thus prepared for the confrontation with Appius, evil incarnate.<sup>74</sup> Chaucer employs the saints' legend convention of the juxtaposition of good to evil in order to emphasize the typological significance of the protagonist's actions.

For the general reading audience, the dichotomy of virtue-evil can be seen as an exaggerated model of the necessity for goodness in thought and deed in the sight of God. The idealized descriptions of Virginia's beauty and goodness seem out of proportion to a rounded character, as conversely, Appius is thoroughly lacking any redeeming qualities. However, the emphasis of this duality is needed for the narrator to render emphatically the opposite motivating forces which operate within the tale. Virginia acts solely from natural goodness, whereas Appius is motivated by envy and lecherousness. As the defender of virtue and purity, Virginius is compelled to slay his own daughter in order to honor this ideal.

The second passage which Chaucer adds to his source contains the dramatic dialogue between Virginius and his daughter. As in the previous addition mentioned, the passage here is intended by Chaucer to focus attention primarily on



Virginia and to highlight the melodrama inherent in this scene. Chaucer uses the saints' legend convention of relying on rhetoric more than dramatic situation to evoke an emotional response from the audience. The dialogue is treated sympathetically to illustrate the dilemma that Virginius confronts in taking a stance based on principles. Despite his love and compassion for his daughter, Virginius passes the death sentence to uphold the abstract ideal of virtue above his personal feelings.

For love, and nat for hate, thou most be deed;  
My pitous hand moot smyten of thyn heed.  
(225-26)

Virginia is given the alternative of death or shame. Virginia's saintliness is tested in this confrontation and she must make a moral choice. Virginia first begs for mercy and then requests a "litel space" in which to "compleyne" her death.

For, pardee, Jepete yaf his doghter grace  
For to compleyne, er he hir slow, alas!  
(240-41)

The biblical comparison suggests the likeness of Virginia's predicament with that of the Christian martyrs and the heroines of the Legends.<sup>75</sup> Following the usual pattern of confrontation-passion-triumph in the saints' legends, Virginia ultimately chooses death rather than to lose her virginity.

"Blissed be God, that I shal dye a mayde!  
Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame;  
Dooth with youre child youre wyl, a Goddes name!"  
(248-250)

Virginia's last words before her death are delivered in the form of a prayer which is a common device in the saints' legends to emphasize the contemplative aspects of the tale and to establish the emotional climate in which to deliver the moral of the tale.<sup>76</sup>

Appropriately, at the end, there is an epilogue which briefly describes the fate of Virginia's antagonists and delivers the moral lesson.

The assertion that Chaucer used the saints' legend conventions is not meant to suggest that he never deviates from the restrictions of the form, but rather to demonstrate how Chaucer chose to use its conventions when it would enhance his tale. For example, Chaucer adds this humorous aside about Virginia's quest for virtuous living:

For al to soone may she lerne loore  
Of booldnesse, whan she woxen is a wyf.  
(70-71)

Although this realistic touch which is characteristic of Chaucer's skill as a story-teller is used to draw attention to Virginia's saintliness, it is not typical of the seriousness and religious intent of the saints' legend genre. Nevertheless, Chaucer obviously did employ many of the conventions of the saints' legend genre when it suited the purpose of his tale.

Clearly, Chaucer recognized the popular literary tastes of his medieval audience and unabashedly catered to their

requests for tales of the saints' lives. "In fact, it would seem that Chaucer enjoyed some reputation as a writer of saints' legends. In the Retraction, he mentions that he had a hand in translating 'legends of seintes.'"77

In addition to entertaining his audience, Chaucer demonstrates an awareness of how the saints' legend conventions could be adapted to his artistic purposes to produce literary works which are uniquely his own. The Physician's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale most particularly illustrate Chaucer's ability to use the conventions of the saints' legend genre to heighten the effect and artistry of his tales and to express the ideals of the saints' lives tradition with sincerity, charm and ease.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nevill Coghill, The Poet Chaucer, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 100.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Hall Gerould describes the popularity of the saints' legends and how they permeated the religious, social, and political fabric of the Middle Ages in Saints' Legends (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916). J. M. Campbell finds a need for scholarly study of the Latin fathers for a clearer understanding of medieval literature and the source references of Chaucer's religious tales in "Patristic Studies and the Literature of Medieval England," Speculum, 8 (1933), 465-78. Sister Mary Raynelda Makarewicz gives a detailed account of Chaucer's borrowings from the Latin fathers of the patristic tradition in The Patristic Influence on Chaucer, Diss. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. Of America Press, 1953). Rodney Delasanta discusses a realistic versus an exegetic interpretation of The Canterbury Tales in "Chaucer and the Exegetes," Studies in Literary Imagination, 4 (1971), 1-10.

<sup>3</sup>W.T.H. Jackson, The Literature of the Middle Ages (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961), p. 356.

<sup>4</sup>Essays by D. S. Brewer and others representative of topics of modern criticism in A. C. Cawley, ed, Chaucer's Mind and Art (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1969).

<sup>5</sup>Additional references for source studies and analogues are noted in the bibliography. Authoritative and concise texts are provided by W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, ed., Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1941).

<sup>6</sup>J.D.M. Ford, "The Saint's Life in Vernacular Literature of the Middle Ages," Catholic Historical Review, 17 (1931-32), 271.

<sup>7</sup>Phyllis C. Gage, "Syntax and Poetry in Chaucer's Prioress's Tale," Neophilologus, 50 (1966), 252-61.

<sup>8</sup>Claude Jones, "The Second Nun's Tale, a Medieval Sermon," Modern Language Review, 32 (1937), 238.

<sup>9</sup>See note 2.

<sup>10</sup>Helen C. White, Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs (Madison, Wisc.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1963), pp. 1-67.

<sup>11</sup>Hippolyte Delehaye, The Legends of the Saints, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1962).

<sup>12</sup>Gordon Hall Gerould, Saints' Legends (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Charles W. Jones, Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England (1947; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1968).

<sup>14</sup>G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (1933; rpt. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966).

<sup>15</sup>Michael R. Paull, "The Influence of the Saint's Legend Genre in the Man of Law's Tale," Chaucer Review, 5 (1970-71), 179-94.

<sup>16</sup>Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend, translated and adapted from the Latin by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger, 2 vols. (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1941).

<sup>17</sup>All references to lines in the Physician's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale are from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), pp. 145-47 and 207-13.

<sup>18</sup>White, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup>Emile Mâle, The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the XIII Century (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1913). Mâle discusses the relationship between medieval art and the saints' lives as told in The Golden Legend.

<sup>20</sup>White, p. 25. Delehaye, p. 8, states that "originally the legend was the account of a saint to be read, legenda, on his feast day, the passion of a martyr or the eulogy of a confessor, without reference to its worth as history."

<sup>21</sup>White, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup>Owst, pp. 113-14. Owst examines the pulpit tradition in literature. Owst sees the medieval interest in the saints as a reflection of a pre-Christian attitude (pagan) to the characters of ancient Teutonic legend.

<sup>23</sup>Gerould, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup>Jacques Douillet, What Is a Saint?, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1958), p. 25.

<sup>25</sup>The texts of these saints' lives are most conveniently available in Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1941), II, pp. 551-53, 571-75, and 708-16.

<sup>26</sup>Jacobus, p. 571.

<sup>27</sup>Jacobus, p. 551.

<sup>28</sup>Jacobus, p. 709. Saint Catherine's name symbolizes the destruction of "the edifice of the devil" and "a chain, for of her good works she fashioned a chain, whereby she climbed to heaven." Four degrees of the chain, or virtues emblematic of holiness, are mentioned in the etymology of the name and treated in greater detail in the narrative itself.

<sup>29</sup>Douillet, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup>Douillet, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup>Douillet, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup>Jacobus, p. 709.

<sup>33</sup>Jacobus, p. 711.

<sup>34</sup>Douillet, p. 68.

<sup>35</sup>White, p. 37.

<sup>36</sup>Douillet, p. 26.

<sup>37</sup>Delehaye, p. 181.

<sup>38</sup>Delehaye, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup>Delehaye, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup>"Bollandists," New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967). A group of Jesuits (Belgium) organized by Jean Bolland (1596-1665) for the critical study and publication of the lives of the saints. Their goal was to purge the lives of the saints of the innumerable apocryphal and legendary details that encumbered them. Their work became that of a long tradition of study and investigation. The group disbursed in 1789, and was reconstituted in 1837. Hippolyte Delehaye (d. 1941) brought to their study the assistance of philology and other subsidiary historical disciplines.

<sup>41</sup>Delehaye, p. 19. "Historical documents display notable variation on the one theme; but legends of the martyrs are always repeating themselves, for they have almost wholly got rid of the personal element and only an abstract figure is left."

<sup>42</sup>Charles W. Jones, p. 61.

<sup>43</sup>Charles W. Jones, p. 60.

<sup>44</sup>Charles W. Jones, p. 62.

<sup>45</sup>James W. Earl, "Typology and Iconographic Style in Early Medieval Hagiography," Studies in Literary Imagination, 8 (1975), 15-46.

<sup>46</sup>Gerould, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup>Earl, pp. 15-46.

<sup>48</sup>Douillet, p. 64.

<sup>49</sup>Gerould, p. 239.

<sup>50</sup>Gerould, p. 240.

<sup>51</sup>Gerould, p. 4, offers a definition of the saints' lives as a psychological type that is, in the nature of the case, ecclesiastical, but not narrowly so.

<sup>52</sup>Gerould, p. 208, provides examples of the lives of virgins from The Golden Legend who stood pre-eminently for the ideal of chastity. Sister Mary Raynelda Makarewicz gives a detailed account of virginity as a state of perfection according to the teachings of Saint Ambrose and Saint Jerome in reference to the Physician's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale in her chapter titled "Virginity Versus Marriage."

<sup>53</sup>Gerould, pp. 240-42, summarizes scholarly research dealing with the legend of St. Cecilia. Gerould concludes that Chaucer was as faithful to the original as possible and commends Chaucer's "sobriety and simplicity" of its technical execution. For additional source information see W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, pp. 664-84.

<sup>54</sup>See the "Foreword" of The Golden Legend for a discussion of Jacobus' method of writing etymologies.

<sup>55</sup>Paul E. Beichner, "Confrontation, Contempt of Court, and Chaucer's Cecilia," Chaucer Review, 8 (1973-74), 198-204.

<sup>56</sup>The source of the flower symbolism has been a popular topic for Chaucerian scholars. The consensus of opinion seems to be that the lilies represent virginity and the roses, martyrdom. See Albert C. Baugh, Chaucer (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), p. 95.

<sup>57</sup>Paull, pp. 179-94, discusses the structural and rhetorical devices found in the saints' legend genre, and more specifically, in the Man of Law's Tale.

<sup>58</sup>Paull, pp. 184-85, defines the episodic nature of the legends as a series of "frames" which are loosely connected on the temporal level but ultimately joined, united, on an extraspatial or divine level.

<sup>59</sup>Paull, p. 193, compares Chaucer's writing technique in the "religious tales" to a modern form of melodrama.

<sup>60</sup>Paull, pp. 182-83, describes the saints' legend convention of juxtaposing the sanctified heroine to agents of the Devil.

<sup>61</sup>Gerould, p. 243.

<sup>62</sup>White, p. 42, names other women martyrs in this category.

<sup>63</sup>Jacobus, pp. 166-67, 351, and 708-16. There one finds strong resemblance in content and style as well as in language between St. Catherine, St. Margaret, and St. Juliana.

<sup>64</sup>Eugene Edward Slaughter, Virtue According to Love, in Chaucer (New York: Bookman Assoc., 1957), p. 214.

<sup>65</sup>Makarewicz, pp. 206-07, considers the human weaknesses of Chaucer's characters that affect the transition from the real to the ideal.

<sup>66</sup>See examples of this pattern in the tales of Saint Agatha, Saint Juliana, Saint Margaret, Saint Christina and others in The Golden Legend.

<sup>67</sup>Frequently the executioners are supernatural creatures, agents of the Devil, or even the Devil himself. See the legend of Saint Margaret in The Golden Legend for examples of the many forms that the Devil may take.



<sup>68</sup>Not mentioned in the life of Saint Cecilia, but common to the saints' legend epilogue are the accounts of the antagonist's fate (usually grotesque), later conversions by the saint's holy example, and continuing miracles in the saint's name. For examples, see the legends of Saint Agnes, Saint Agatha, and Saint Juliana in The Golden Legend.

<sup>69</sup>For information regarding the source of the Physician's Tale, see W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, pp. 398-408.

<sup>70</sup>For more specific information on Chaucer's borrowings from the patristic fathers, see Makarewicz, pp. 21-28.

<sup>71</sup>Anne Middleton, "The Physician's Tale and Love's Martyrs: 'Ensamples Mo Than Ten' as a Method in the Canterbury Tales," Chaucer Review, 8 (1973-74), 9-31. Middleton discusses Chaucer's contributions in the Physician's Tale from the Legends.

<sup>72</sup>Makarewicz, p. 21, traces the virtues, demeanor and education of Virginia (35-120) to St. Ambrose's Libri tres de virginibus.

<sup>73</sup>Makarewicz, p. 26.

<sup>74</sup>Slaughter, p. 209, lists the incarnation of specific virtues and vices in the characters of Virginia and Appius, respectively.

<sup>75</sup>The request for time to receive Holy Communion, to pray, and to settle personal affairs before death is a common device used in the saints' legends. For examples, see Saint Margaret, Saint Martha, and Saint Cecilia in The Golden Legend.

<sup>76</sup>Paull, pp. 190-91.

<sup>77</sup>Paull, p. 192.

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